

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Mark 1: 4-11 and John 1: 43-51

This morning I want to talk both about the Baptism of Jesus and today's Gospel reading about the calling of Nathaniel. This is because when you move the Epiphany which occurs on January 6 to the following Sunday (the 10th of the month), you use the readings for Epiphany itself which is always about the wise men, the Magi. In doing so, you don't deal with the reading for Epiphany I which is about the baptism of Jesus. Since these are both critical to the whole reason for the season of Epiphany, we need some commentary on both.

The story of Jesus' baptism in Mark "matches the sort that was told about other important religious leaders, teachers, prophets or political figures" in the first century. This is because in antiquity "an individual who changes human culture or history does not come into the world unannounced." Both Matthew and Luke provide appropriate nativity narratives and accounts of genealogy to support the belief that Jesus is the Son of God. These stories were no doubt in circulation before the evangelists wrote them down, again because at the time great individuals did not simply make up their destinies as they went along. There needs to be some kind of divine call. Certainly, that is what is going on in Mark's account of the baptism of Jesus. This is not meant to suggest that the event did not occur but rather that it was expected by the audience in question. No one could actually have observed the blessing from God brought by the dove. Thus, it was left to the imagination of the author to fill in these details. John the Baptist tells his followers that a "stronger one is to follow" him and thus points forward to such an expectation. The blessing of God, then, appropriately announces "the beginning of the saving intervention of God that the pious had been anticipating for almost two centuries."

It is also important to point out how Mark sandwiches his entire account of the life of Jesus between this story of the blessing of God at his baptism and the testimony of the Centurion at the foot of the cross that this was surely the Son of God. The first pronouncement comes from God, and the second comes from a Gentile, a Roman soldier, and a very ordinary human witness. The point is not made accidentally. It is very purposeful, because it begins with a heavenly designation which is only later confirmed by a human being who has come to believe what the gospel account affirms: that Jesus is the Son of God in whom the Father is well pleased.

When a famous German classical scholar first read Mark's gospel, here is what he said about it: he had the sense that "something very important was being put forward here with a superior purpose and concentration throughout the book....The style and content of the story arouse a feeling of otherness, a feeling that this is not a history like other histories, not a biography like other biographies, but a

development of *the actions, sayings, and suffering of a higher being on his way through this anxious world of human beings and demons.*” It can also be said that “Mark seems to make a point of portraying (Jesus) as unrecognized and rejected, even humiliated, continually let down and eventually deserted by even his closest associates, and the eventual victim of a hostile establishment.”

One might almost conclude from this account that he was a “heroic failure” but for the dramatic account of his baptism by John and subsequent blessing by God and the resurrection itself which is only revealed rather cryptically in the final chapter. Since the book would have been delivered orally to small groups of ordinary people, it is clear that all of this would have had a profound effect upon them. Mark’s book “reflects not the distant evaluation of a scholarly admirer of Jesus but the subjective experience of one of those who shared most closely in the stirring and yet profoundly disturbing events of Jesus’ public ministry and his confrontation with the Jerusalem establishment.” ‘How could this be?’, they must have asked themselves. ‘He was blessed directly by God the Father and yet here he is at the end of his life rejected by everyone and crucified like a common criminal. Still, in the end he is vindicated through the resurrection.’ One could easily conclude that this has to be the most compelling story ever told.

The setting for today’s gospel from John is this: after the witness of John the Baptist, the evangelist takes up a series of scenes in which Jesus gathers his first disciples. Because of John’s testimony, “Andrew confesses that Jesus is the Messiah and brings his brother, Simon Peter, to Jesus as well.” On the following day, Jesus calls Philip. Philip in turn testifies to Nathanael, who “perceives that Jesus is the Son of God and confesses this to Jesus.” What this accomplishes is to link John the Baptist with Jesus’ disciples. But, even more importantly, it depicts “the significance of testimony and acknowledgment of who Jesus is.” And this brings us to the reason for the inclusion of this episode in the festival of Epiphany which concerns the revelation of Christ to the world.

This opening chapter of John’s account prepares the reader for the story to come, one filled with “signs and discourses, a tale of conflict and death.” By providing this “cosmic perspective of Jesus and using language of rhetoric and persuasion, the author is actively engaging the reader to make a decision about who Jesus really is.” By the end of this first chapter, then, one gathers the impression that Jesus is, indeed, *all in all.*” Among the four gospels, John’s “stands out because of its structure, its tone, and the picture it gives of Jesus’ self-revelation. It has been called the ‘spiritual gospel’ because it deals so clearly with issues of the origination and destination of Jesus from heaven and the crucial role of faith in Jesus’ life.” Nothing could suggest this more clearly than the episode about Nathanael’s conversion.

Andrew plays a behind-the-scenes role in John’s gospel, “but by playing his small role faithfully, he makes a significant contribution to the Christian story.” Crucially, it is Andrew who brings Peter to Jesus, and Jesus pays Simon (his original name) a compliment by naming him “Rock” (Cephas is the Aramaic word for rock, and Peter is the Greek one). Jesus tells Philip to follow him, and Philip in turn invites Nathanael

to come see Jesus. He does so by saying “we have found him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, wrote: Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph (because Joseph was the legal father).” Thus, John’s witness “created a ripple effect that widens with each successive disciple, (which results in) a tidal wave of faith that the world initially will ignore” but which over time will sweep over the world.

Clearly, Jesus knows more about Nathanael than he could have been expected to know having just encountered him for the first time. He has a kind of supernatural knowledge of who Nathanael is. Earlier, Andrew had identified Jesus, but now Nathanael – heretofore a complete stranger to Jesus – acknowledges him with three titles: *Rabbi, Son of God and King of Israel*. He may not yet understand that Jesus is God, but the author of this gospel has already announced this in his prologue. It is helpful to recall that the first words from Jesus in John’s gospel are “*What are you looking for?*” in response to John’s referring to him as the Lamb of God. It is to these “words of invitation and promise” --- this question --- that those who follow in the narrative will respond throughout John’s account. This is where his public ministry commences, and the text tells us that “this is how the Christian faith is passed from person to person. That’s how it started with Jesus, and that’s how it’s been for 2,000-plus years.”

Almighty God, whose Son our Savior Jesus Christ is the light of the world: Grant that your people, illumined by your Word and Sacraments, may shine with the radiance of Christ’s glory, that he may be known, worshipped, and obeyed to the ends of the earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, now and forever. Amen.

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